

The Language of Empire: Rome and the Idea of Empire from the Third Century BC to the Second Century AD. By JOHN RICHARDSON. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp. viii + 220. Cloth, \$90.00. ISBN 978-0-521-81501-7.

John Richardson (R.) has long been interested in the rise of the Roman Empire and has examined the topic in several well-known books and articles. [[1]] In *The Language of Empire*, he approaches the subject from a new perspective by undertaking a linguistic study of the Roman concept of empire, using electronic databases, search engines and spreadsheets to help compile his data. [[2]] Beginning with the question, “What did the Romans think they were doing when they created the Roman Empire?” (p. vii), R. attempts to reconstruct the Roman definition and understanding of “empire” by studying the evolution of the Latin terms *imperium* and *provincia* from the Republican period into the High Empire. He examines the use of these terms in Latin literature (and some inscriptions) and attempts to decipher the meaning of each passage to identify when the words gained new meanings for the Romans. Using this data, he argues that there is no evidence that the Romans conceived of their empire as a geographic possession until the reign of Augustus. Rather, during the second (and most of the first) century BC *imperium* and *provincia* referred to the exercise of power, and only with the establishment of emperors did these terms evolve to signify a single, geographic entity controlled and possessed by the Romans: the *imperium Romanum*.

The Language of Empire is not merely a word study; R.’s analysis of Roman word-use makes a valuable contribution to the ongoing debate on the nature of Roman imperialism. This debate has been dominated by the opposing models of Theodor Mommsen—who believed that Roman imperialism was fundamentally defensive and that Rome unintentionally acquired its empire through wars fought in defense of its own (or its allies’) interests—and of William Harris, who argued that Republican Rome was inherently aggressive and warlike, and that it intentionally acquired an empire through expansionary conquest. [[3]] While R. does not attempt to disprove either position directly, his book provides an alternate approach by suggesting that imperialism should be studied as an evolving idea, and that there was not one Roman imperialism but a series of them (p. 192). Thus Romans in the Republic understood *imperium* fundamentally in terms of power, and their “empire” as “control of what others did” (p. 62). In the final decades of the Republic, however, the meaning of *imperium* expanded to encompass the sense “the power of the Roman people” (p. 115), and by the end of Augustus’ princi-

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pate it acquired the new notion “the power of the imperial house to control the whole Roman world and of the entity that is so controlled, that is the Roman Empire” (p. 135). Put another way, R. argues that a senator in the Republic would have considered Roman expansion “the growth of Roman power and control of others, rather than of territory which was called ‘Roman,’” whereas a senator in the High Empire would have had “no doubt that Trajan had increased the land area of the Roman Empire when Arabia was brought under the *forma provinciae*” (p. 192). Roman imperialism thus evolved and changed over time, and this change is visible in the Roman language.

R. divides his argument into six chapters, the first of which, “Ideas of Empire,” is really an introduction that lays out his argument that Rome’s attitude towards its empire evolved from the abstract notion of “power” to the concrete idea of territorial possession (p. 9). Chapters 2–5 comprise the core of the book, providing a chronological discussion of the evolution of the terms *imperium* and *provincia* that—R. maintains—demonstrates the changing Roman conception of “empire.” Chapter 2, “The beginnings: Hannibal to Sulla,” argues that the primary definitions of *imperium* and *provincia* in the second century (down to Sulla) were “magisterial power” and “the task or responsibility of a magistrate,” respectively (p. 61), and asserts that neither term carried the notion of territorial possession. Chapter 3, “Cicero’s empire: *imperium populi Romani*,” argues that the fundamental meanings of *imperium* and *provincia* remained unchanged in the Late Republic, although both terms were used in a new way to express the idea of a “state” (p. 71): *imperium* was used in reference to the power of the Roman people (p. 79), while *provincia* could signify “an entity for the government of an empire” (p. 115). Despite this change, neither word represented a territorial conception of the Roman Empire (pp. 115–16). Chapter 4, “The Augustan empire: *imperium Romanum*,” argues that the military and political changes brought about by Augustus—in particular the emperor’s preeminent control of *imperium* and *provinciae*—caused a fundamental shift in the meaning of *imperium* to signify a real, territorial empire based on control of geographic units called *provinciae*. Henceforth, the Roman Empire was conceived as a territorial entity (p. 145). Chapter 5, “After Augustus,” demonstrates that the new, Augustan meanings of *imperium* and *provincia* continued into the High Empire, while Chapter 6, “Conclusion: imperial presuppositions and patterns of empire” reiterates the thesis that Rome’s acquisition of its empire evolved from a “power-by-conquest” model to one of “power-as-possession” (p. 193). Three appendices close the book: two are analyses of the

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uses of *imperium* and *provincia* in Cicero and Livy, while a third discusses the use of these terms in legal writers.

Although R. has done a good job working with his data and he builds a convincing argument, some historians may be suspicious of his use of statistics, since data of this sort can seem more conclusive than they are. For example, R. finds that the predominant meaning of *imperium* in Cicero's works (52.48% of all usages) is "the power of magistrates and promagistrates" (pp. 66–7)—but what does "power" mean in these cases? Does it literally mean a consul's legal use of his official *imperium*, or could it refer to the social and political influence powerful magistrates wield beyond their legal authority? Is it correct to assume that *imperium consulis* always has the same sense, or might it—like "the power of the presidency"—contain multiple meanings? If the latter, R.'s statistics might stand in need of adjustment. Likewise, the limited number and variety of sources from the second century makes it difficult to state definitively that *imperium* did not carry a territorial sense at that time, especially since R. notes (pp. 49, 54) that *imperium* had a range of meanings, and at least one early occurrence seems to flirt with the notion of geography (Plaut. *Cist.* 235: *at enim ne tu exponas pugno os metuo in imperio meo*, "but indeed I am afraid that you will lay out my face with your fist in my own domain"). Another potential challenge is the narrow focus on *imperium* and *provincia*. While these were doubtless fundamental concepts in Rome's language of empire, other terms such as *orbis terrarum* were used by the Romans to describe geography and must be taken account of.

In several places R. supplements his linguistic data with non-linguistic material to strengthen his argument. For example, he begins his second chapter with an extensive examination of Livy's account of the second century BC in order to establish the basic operation and meaning of *imperium* and *provincia* during that period, and he uses discussions of Cato's mission to Cyprus and Pompey's settlement of the East to illustrate the changing concept of *provincia* in the Late Republic. At times, these historical events provide better evidence for R.'s argument than the linguistic material that lies at the heart of *The Language of Empire*. For example, while the Late Republican linguistic evidence indicates that the term *provincia* was slowly acquiring the new sense of a geographically defined "territory" that belonged to the Roman people, this development is demonstrated more clearly and effectively by Pompey's creation of Syria as a permanent Roman province in 63 BC (pp. 111–14). Likewise, the historical facts of Augustus' rearrangement of Rome's system of

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government, military command and provincial governance are far more copious and definitive than the few linguistic references to *totum imperium populi Romani* or to *imperium Romanum* during his reign (pp. 135–45). The book thus seems at times to wander from the “language” of empire to focus instead on the events that demonstrate the evolution of empire.

Despite these cautions, *The Language of Empire* is a fine book with much to offer historians and philologists alike. R.’s discussion of Cicero’s language is especially rich and deserving of attention for its careful, nuanced analysis of the orator’s use of the terms *imperium* and *provincia*. While the nature of the arguments and evidence employed makes the book more appropriate for professional scholars, the general reader will find it accessible, engaging and useful for understanding the growth of the Roman Empire. The production and the quality of the editing are very high, although the font and line spacing of the main text are strangely large. R. continues to be an authority on the development of the Roman Empire, and this book is sure to become a standard, oft-cited text.

FRED K. DROGULA

Providence College

[[1]] J. Richardson, “Polybius’ view of the Roman empire,” *PBSR* 47 (1979) 1–11; *Hispaniae: Spain and the Development of Roman Imperialism 218–82 BC* (Cambridge, 1986); “*Imperium Romanum*: empire and the language of power,” *JRS* 81 (1991) 1–9; *The Romans in Spain* (Oxford, 1996); *Appian: the Wars of the Romans in Iberia* (Warminster, 2000).

[[2]] For R.’s methods and early results, see his “Indexing Roman imperialism,” *The Indexer* 24 (2005) 138–40.

[[3]] Th. Mommsen, *Römische Geschichte*, Vol. I (Berlin, 1912) 699, and W.V. Harris, *War and Imperialism in Republican Rome 327–70 BC* (Oxford, 1979).